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Vancouver Island Golf Trail

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Vancouver Island Golf Trail

Golf an Island of Natural Beauty in a Country Both Foreign yet Familiar

I have golfed, kayaked, skied, hiked and photographed every corner of the world — but it is the place I have called home for more than two decades that still has the ability to take my breath away. British Columbia, Canada's most westerly province, offers extremes of geography from snow-capped mountain ranges to desert oases, from beaches and storm-tossed waves to old growth forests with towering redwood trees.

In the far southwest corner of the province, a 90-minute ferry ride from the mainland, sits Vancouver Island, the largest island on the west coast of North America. Similar in size to Great Britain, but with a population of fewer than 900,000, Vancouver Island is *Travel and Leisure Magazine's* #1 Island Getaway in North America.

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The island, which is 100 km wide and 460 km long, boasts a 250-km stretch — from the southern-most tip to the central coastal town of Campbell River — dotted with 13 golf courses. Dubbed the Vancouver Island Golf Trail, in the manner of the famed Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail in Alabama, it features courses designed by renowned golf architects, distinct topography and extra-curricular activities such as world-class salmon fishing and grizzly bear and whale watching. For the foodie, there is fresh seafood, award-winning wineries and thriving regional craft beer and spirits industries. Little wonder the trail was selected by readers of *Golf Magazine* as one of *The Best Golf Deals* in North America.

We travel to the island though Haro Strait on a BC Ferry, breathing in the fresh salt air and scanning the ocean for signs of the Orca whales and dolphins that navigate the coast.

My destination is Victoria, the provincial capital and *Second Best Small City in the World* as voted by readers of *Conde Nast Traveler Magazine* — and the starting point for my golf holiday. Located at the southern tip of the Island, Victoria lies further south than many parts of the United States and enjoys beautiful temperate weather through most of the year.



Golf the Island

The Golf Trail is divided into four distinct regions — Victoria, Cowichan Valley, Parksville/Qualicum Beach and Courtenay/Campbell River. My plan is to golf at least one course from each region during my seven-day holiday. Planning my itinerary and reviewing special packages was easy thanks to the golfvancouverisland.ca website. My golf schedule includes Bear Mountain Resort and Olympic View in Victoria, then north to Cowichan Golf Club, on to Fairwinds in Parksville and finish up on the most northerly course, Quadra Island Golf Club.

Part way through my first day in Victoria, I am already wishing I had planned a longer stay. A double-decker bus tour takes me along the waters of Juan de Fuca Strait, past beautiful parks, 19th Century stately mansions and the grand architecture of the provincial legislature buildings. No wonder Victoria is known as the Garden City. In the afternoon I am on the dock at the *Prince of Whales Whale Watching* office for my expedition, at exhilarating speed, over salt waters in search of sea lions, seals and whales. I am not disappointed. Truly exciting!



I overnight at the majestic Empress Hotel, recognized as one of the top 25 iconic hotels in the world and honored by *Travel and Leisure Magazine* as Canada's finest hotel. The four-diamond property overlooking the inner harbor is a stately gem known for its afternoon high tea, served in the sophisticated Lobby Lounge and a tradition since 1908.

The following morning my first day of golf is at Bear Mountain Resort. There are two 18-hole layouts, the Mountain and the Valley, designed by the father-and-son team of Jack and Steve Nicklaus. The courses complement one another, as the Mountain features elevation changes, rock outcrops and panoramic vistas and the Valley course is home to forest, water and plentiful bunkering.

I play the Mountain course where the par 3s are truly memorable. The 152-yard 10th hole is an island green and the 165-yard 14th hole is perhaps the most scenic I've ever played. Situated at the highest point of the course, the tee box and green are extensions of the rock wall with no opportunity for a bail out as the cavernous descent is your fairway. The vista is of the snow-capped volcanic Mount Baker 100 km to the south. I'm told the Valley course, at 6,800 yards in length and playing to a par 71, can be difficult. There are no houses adjacent to the course, so I commit to playing it on my next visit.



The resort is one of the finest on the island. It caters to tennis and cycling aficionados and to connoisseurs of the good life — Bear Mountain has one of Canada's largest wine cellars and features more than 2,000 labels, according to Food and Beverage Director Vincy Dsouza. Following my round, I dine in the beautifully appointed

Master's Lounge, enjoying a gourmet burger and a Blue Buck, wonderful locally crafted amber ale. The craft beer industry is burgeoning in Victoria and I highly recommend a tour of the microbreweries.

In the afternoon my destination is Olympic View, a short 15-minute drive away. It has been several years since I've played here and the course is as beautiful as I remember it. Fairways in palettes of green, flowering plants and numerous varieties of trees create a tranquil environment on a course that was rated by *Golf Digest* as *Best to Play*. The striking vistas of the Olympic Mountains in Washington State and the constant companions of deer and eagles make the course "special to experience," says General Manager Randy Frank.

I enjoy my attempts of hitting numerous elevated greens *and* become adept at aiming for the top of the flagstick. At 535 yards and an uphill par, the finishing hole from the back tees is difficult at the best of times — but it is where Tiger Woods, on his only visit to British Columbia as a member of the Stanford University team, chipped in for an eagle, winning the individual honours.

Back on the road, I travel the scenic Coastal Highway 19A towards Duncan and Vancouver Island's celebrated wine country, Cowichan Valley. Pinot Gris, Marechal Foch and Pinot Noir have become popular varieties. Sheltered from the storms of the Pacific Ocean, the valley has the ideal environs for growing robust grapes, and the area is now home to nine wineries. Trisha Larsen, Director for Golf Vancouver Island, recommends taking some time to visit the picturesque and quaint village of Cowichan Bay, where you will most likely find "fresh crab waiting on the dock from local fisherman."



My destination is the Cowichan Golf Club, host of numerous national and provincial championships. This is my first time playing the course, and while I know it has a reputation as a challenging 6,189 yards, I feel confident I can handle it. This is a thinking person's golf course with open and tight tree-lined fairways, doglegs and fast greens. Perhaps my problem is that I'm not thinking enough. The par 4 10th is a perfect example of my play. Using my driver, I proceed to hit my ball into the trees. Note to self: should have used a 3-wood. Thinking I can get out of the forest, my ball ricochets off a branch into a bunker. I am finally on the green in five. I proceed to three putt. Had time permitted I would have accepted the kind invitation for a game-improvement lesson from my playing partner. Time for a wine-tasting tour!

Day 3 and my destination is Fairwinds Golf Club, a creation of Canada's noted course designer Les Furber. A par 71, it is not a long course at 6,200 yards, however Furber is masterful in his ability to integrate hazards into the beauty of the surrounding landscape and his signature multi-tiered greens. I rarely take out my driver on this oceanside course. With 11 holes where water comes into play and 70 strategically placed bunkers, General Manager Brett Standerwick counsels me to plan every shot and execute.

Leaving Fairwinds I pull off of Highway 1 to follow the shoreline road known as the Oceanside Route which winds along the eastern coast of the island and the cold waters of the Georgia Strait. This 123-km stretch of highway takes me past the source of the world-famous Fanny Bay oysters and on to my final destination, Campbell River.

Renowned for its salmon fishing, Campbell River is also home to three entertaining and unique golf courses. Arriving at Painter's Lodge, I check-in, then conveniently stroll to the dock with my clubs in hand to board a water taxi to quaint Quadra Island. The mountains of British Columbia's Coastal Range strike a commanding profile to the east, and harbor seals break to the surface to check us out during my short trip across Discovery Passage. Upon arrival, a complimentary shuttle whisks us to the scenic nine-hole golf course.

The course is memorable for the beautiful views and the friendly and relaxed atmosphere. A Vancouver Island *Juan de Fuca Cerveza* is a wonderful way to finish my round.

I still had time for one more game so off I go to Storey Creek Golf Club, 14 km south of Campbell River. My Quadra Island playing partners had chided me that it would be a shame not to experience this course. Voted by Canada's national golf magazine as British Columbia's *#1 Public Golf Course* and *#5 in Canada for Best Value* it truly was award winning. Challenging yet fair, I was continually distracted by the abundance of beauty and wildlife. Publicized as 'a Course in Nature', sightings of bear and deer as hawks and eagles soared above, this Les Furber Design was a memorable way to complete my golf holiday.

Vancouver Island golf courses mirror the diversity and beauty of the landscape. From stunning ocean views to grasslands and majestic forests, each course beckons with its own personality and style. Those who have the good fortune to visit will be rewarded with memories to last a lifetime. I know I will be back.



About the Author

Michael has an extensive background in sports and media marketing which has translated into consulting, lecturing and writing assignments on sports and destination travel for the past 20 years. Former host for the weekly syndicated show *GolfRadio*, that focused on the business of the game and unique travel destinations - from Fiji to Florida and many points in between he has interviewed industry visionaries and characters from around the globe and has shared many of his experiences with writing assignments for respected North American and European publications.

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